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California Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care Holds Public Hearing on Draft Recommendations

Focus on How Courts and Child Welfare Partners Can Better Serve Youth and Families in Foster Care

San Francisco — The California Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care holds a public hearing today to get expert and public reaction to its draft recommendations for court reform. The hearing, at the Hiram Johnson State Building, 455 Golden Gate Avenue, will solicit comments on proposals to help the courts and their child welfare partners improve foster care outcomes.

Every child who enters or leaves foster care in California—approximately 80,000 children and youth—must come before a juvenile court. This is where critical and life-changing decisions are made, such as where a child will live and with whom.

The speakers at today's hearing include those who know the system best: youth in foster care, parents, judges, attorneys and child welfare administrators, as well as philanthropists and others who work to support foster youth.

The commission's recommendations address such problems as:

- Overwhelming caseloads on the part of judges, attorneys, and social workers, which lead to rushed hearings averaging only 10 – 15 minutes.
- Routine delays and continuances, which mean deferred decisions and uncertainty for both children and parents.
- Children and families not always having a meaningful voice in court.
- Inadequate communication between families and their attorneys, including the fact that some youth do not meet their attorneys until the day of their hearings.
- Insufficient coordination between the courts, child welfare and other agencies that work with the same families, which can lead to conflicting direction to families, disconnected services, and incompatible case plans.
- Lack of adequate and flexible funding to offer early services to families in order to prevent entry into foster care and keep children in their own homes safely.

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The Blue Ribbon Commission is the first statewide panel to focus on court responsibilities in child welfare. California Chief Justice Ronald M. George appointed the commission in March 2006 and gave it two years to develop its recommendations; it is chaired by Supreme Court Associate Justice Carlos R. Moreno, who will preside over today's hearing. Among the local Blue Ribbon commissioners who will be taking testimony are retired Santa Clara County Judge Leonard Edwards; Marin County Public Defender Joseph Spaeth; Robin Allen, Executive Director of the California CASA Association; and John O'Toole, Executive Director of the National Center for Youth Law.

The draft recommendations to be discussed today focus on four areas:

- Prevention and permanency: Ensuring that all children have a safe, stable and permanent home
- Court reform: Changing the way dependency courts do business
- Collaboration: Increasing collaboration between courts and their partners
- Resources and funding: Finding the resources to get the job done

Among those scheduled to offer public comment today are: Karen J. Mathis, Immediate Past President of the American Bar Association and Mark Courtney, Executive Director of Partners for Our Children, a professor at the School of Social Work, University of Washington. Also scheduled to testify, among others, are Sonoma County Judge Arnold Rosenfield and Placer County Judge Colleen Nichols.

Justice Moreno, in discussing today's hearing, noted the importance of getting public input from those who know the system best, starting with the foster youth who are at the heart of court proceedings. He said: "Foster youth themselves are our most important audience. These children are at the center of every judicial decision that is made. We want to ensure that each foster child and family in the system gets a fair hearing and a decision that addresses their individual needs and concerns."

The San Francisco hearing is the second of two public hearings. The first was held in Los Angeles on May 12. The draft recommendations are available for public comment until today or shortly thereafter. The draft recommendations can be found at www.courtinfo.ca.gov/blueribbon.

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